

CHAPTER 7

NIGHT fell on Redmoat. I glanced from the window at the nocturne in silver and green which lay beneath me. To the west of the shrubbery, with its broken canopy of elms and beyond the copper beech which marked the center of its mazes, a gap offered a glimpse of the Waverney where it swept into a broad. Faint bird-calls floated over the water. These, with the whisper of leaves, alone claimed the ear.

Ideal rural peace, and the music of an English summer evening; but to my eyes, every shadow holding fantastic terrors; to my ears, every sound a signal of dread. For the deathful hand of Fu-Manchu was stretched over Redmoat, at any hour to loose strange, Oriental horrors upon its inmates.

"Well," said Nayland Smith, joining me at the window, "we had dared to hope him dead, but we know now that he lives!"

The Rev. J. D. Eltham coughed nervously, and I turned, leaning my elbow upon the table, and studied the play of expression upon the refined, sensitive face of the clergyman.

"You think I acted rightly in sending for you, Mr. Smith?"

Nayland Smith smoked furiously.

"Mr. Eltham," he replied, "you see in me a man groping in the dark. I am to-day no nearer to the conclusion of my mission than upon the day when I left Mandalay. You offer me a clue; I am here. Your affair, I believe, stands thus: A series of attempted burglaries, or something of the kind, has alarmed your household. Yesterday, returning from London with your daughter, you were both drugged in some way and, occupying a compartment to yourselves, you both slept. Your daughter awoke, and saw someone else in the carriage-- a yellow-faced man who held a case of instruments in his hands."

"Yes; I was, of course, unable to enter into particulars over the telephone. The man was standing by one of the windows. Directly he observed that my daughter was awake, he stepped towards her."

"What did he do with the case in his hands?"

"She did not notice--or did not mention having noticed. In fact, as was natural, she was so frightened that she recalls nothing more, beyond the fact that she strove to arouse me, without succeeding, felt hands grasp her shoulders--and swooned."

"But someone used the emergency cord, and stopped the train."

"Greba has no recollection of having done so."

"Hm! Of course, no yellow-faced man was on the train. When did you awake?"

"I was aroused by the guard, but only when he had repeatedly shaken me."

"Upon reaching Great Yarmouth you immediately called up Scotland Yard? You acted very wisely, sir. How long were you in China?"

Mr. Eltham's start of surprise was almost comical.

"It is perhaps not strange that you should be aware of my residence in China, Mr. Smith," he said; "but my not having mentioned it may seem so. The fact is"--his sensitive face flushed in palpable embarrassment-- "I left China under what I may term an episcopal cloud. I have lived in retirement ever since. Unwittingly--I solemnly declare to you, Mr. Smith, unwittingly--I stirred

up certain deep-seated prejudices in my endeavors to do my duty--my duty. I think you asked me how long I was in China? I was there from 1896 until 1900--four years."

"I recall the circumstances, Mr. Eltham," said Smith, with an odd note in his voice. "I have been endeavoring to think where I had come across the name, and a moment ago I remembered. I am happy to have met you, sir."

The clergyman blushed again like a girl, and slightly inclined his head, with its scanty fair hair.

"Has Redmoat, as its name implies, a moat round it? I was unable to see in the dusk." "It remains. Redmoat--a corruption of Round Moat--was formerly a priory, disestablished by the eighth Henry in 1536." His pedantic manner was quaint at times. "But the moat is no longer flooded. In fact, we grow cabbages in part of it. If you refer to the strategic strength of the place"--he smiled, but his manner was embarrassed again--"it is considerable. I have barbed wire fencing, and--other arrangements. You see, it is a lonely spot," he added apologetically. "And now, if you will excuse me, we will resume these gruesome inquiries after the more pleasant affairs of dinner."

He left us.

"Who is our host?" I asked, as the door closed.

Smith smiled.

"You are wondering what caused the `episcopal cloud?'" he suggested. "Well, the deep-seated prejudices which our reverend friend stirred up culminated in the Boxer Risings."

"Good heavens, Smith!" I said; for I could not reconcile the diffident personality of the clergyman with the memories which those words awakened.

"He evidently should be on our danger list," my friend continued quickly; "but he has so completely effaced himself of recent years that I think it probable that someone else has only just recalled his existence to mind. The Rev. J. D. Eltham, my dear Petrie, though he may be a poor hand at saving souls, at any rate, has saved a score of Christian women from death--and worse."

"J. D. Eltham--" I began.

"Is `Parson Dan!'" rapped Smith, "the `Fighting Missionary,' the man who with a garrison of a dozen cripples and a German doctor held the hospital at Nan-Yang against two hundred Boxers. That's who the Rev. J. D. Eltham is! But what is he up to, now, I have yet to find out. He is keeping something back-- something which has made him an object of interest to Young China!"

During dinner the matters responsible for our presence there did not hold priority in the conversation. In fact, this, for the most part, consisted in light talk of books and theaters.

Greba Eltham, the clergyman's daughter, was a charming young hostess, and she, with Vernon Denby, Mr. Eltham's nephew, completed the party. No doubt the girl's presence, in part, at any rate, led us to refrain from the subject uppermost in our minds.

These little pools of calm dotted along the torrential course of the circumstances which were bearing my friend and me onward to unknown issues form pleasant, sunny spots in my dark recollections.

So I shall always remember, with pleasure, that dinner-party at Redmoat, in the old-world dining-room; it was so very peaceful, so almost grotesquely calm. For I, within my very bones, felt it to be the calm before the storm. When, later, we men passed to the library, we seemed to leave that atmosphere behind us.

"Redmoat," said the Rev. J. D. Eltham, "has latterly become the theater of strange doings."

He stood on the hearth-rug. A shaded lamp upon the big table and candles in ancient sconces upon the mantelpiece afforded dim illumination. Mr. Eltham's nephew, Vernon Denby, lolled smoking on the window-seat, and I sat near to him. Nayland Smith paced restlessly up and down the room.

"Some mouths ago, almost a year," continued the clergyman, "a burglarious attempt was made upon the house. There was an arrest, and the man confessed that he had been tempted by my collection." He waved his hand vaguely towards the several cabinets about the shadowed room.

"It was shortly afterwards that I allowed my hobby for-- playing at forts to run away with me." He smiled an apology. "I virtually fortified Redmoat--against trespassers of any kind, I mean. You have seen that the house stands upon a kind of large mound. This is artificial, being the buried ruins of a Roman outwork; a portion of the ancient castrum." Again he waved indicatively, this time toward the window.

"When it was a priory it was completely isolated and defended by its environing moat. Today it is completely surrounded by barbed-wire fencing. Below this fence, on the east, is a narrow stream, a tributary of the Waverney; on the north and west, the high road, but nearly twenty feet below, the banks being perpendicular. On the south is the remaining part of the moat--now my kitchen garden; but from there up to the level of the house is nearly twenty feet again, and the barbed wire must also be counted with.

"The entrance, as you know, is by the way of a kind of cutting. There is a gate at the foot of the steps (they are some of the original steps of the priory, Dr. Petrie), and another gate at the head."

He paused, and smiled around upon us boyishly.

"My secret defenses remain to be mentioned," he resumed; and, opening a cupboard, he pointed to a row of batteries, with a number of electric bells upon the wall behind. "The more vulnerable spots are connected at night with these bells," he said triumphantly. "Any attempt to scale the barbed wire or to force either gate would set two or more of these ringing. A stray cow raised one false alarm," he added, "and a careless rook threw us into a perfect panic on another occasion."

He was so boyish--so nervously brisk and acutely sensitive-- that it was difficult to see in him the hero of the Nan-Yang hospital. I could only suppose that he had treated the Boxers' raid in the same spirit wherein he met would-be trespassers within the precincts of Redmoat. It had been an escapade, of which he was afterwards ashamed, as, faintly, he was ashamed of his "fortifications." "But," rapped Smith, "it was not the visit of the burglar which prompted these elaborate precautions."

Mr. Eltham coughed nervously.

"I am aware," he said, "that having invoked official aid, I must be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Smith. It was the burglar who was responsible for my continuing the wire fence all round the grounds, but the electrical contrivance followed, later, as a result of several disturbed nights. My servants grew uneasy about someone who came, they said, after dusk. No one could describe this nocturnal visitor, but certainly we found traces. I must admit that.

"Then--I received what I may term a warning. My position is a peculiar one-- a peculiar one. My daughter, too, saw this prowling, person, over by the Roman castrum, and described him as a yellow man. It was the incident in the train following closely upon this other, which led me to speak to the police, little as I desired to--er--court publicity."

Nayland Smith walked to a window, and looked out across the sloping lawn to where the shadows of the shrubbery lay. A dog was howling dismally somewhere.

"Your defenses are not impregnable, after all, then?" he jerked. "On our way up this evening Mr. Denby was telling us about the death of his collie a few nights ago."

The clergyman's face clouded.

"That, certainly, was alarming," he confessed.

"I had been in London for a few days, and during my absence Vernon came down, bringing the dog with him. On the night of his arrival it ran, barking, into the shrubbery yonder, and did not come out. He went to look for it with a lantern, and found it lying among the bushes, quite dead. The poor creature had been dreadfully beaten about the head."

"The gates were locked," Denby interrupted, "and no one could have got out of the grounds without a ladder and someone to assist him. But there was so sign of a living thing about. Edwards and I searched every corner."

"How long has that other dog taken to howling?" inquired Smith.

"Only since Rex's death," said Denby quickly.

"It is my mastiff," explained the clergyman, "and he is confined in the yard. He is never allowed on this side of the house."

Nayland Smith wandered aimlessly about the library.

"I am sorry to have to press you, Mr. Eltham," he said, "but what was the nature of the warning to which you referred, and from whom did it come?"

Mr. Eltham hesitated for a long time.

"I have been so unfortunate," he said at last, "in my previous efforts, that I feel assured of your hostile criticism when I tell you that I am contemplating an immediate return to Ho-Nan!"

Smith jumped round upon him as though moved by a spring.

"Then you are going back to Nan-Yang?" he cried. "Now I understand! Why have you not told me before? That is the key for which I have vainly been seeking. Your troubles date from the time of your decision to return?"

"Yes, I must admit it," confessed the clergyman diffidently.

"And your warning came from China?"

"It did."

"From a Chinaman?"

"From the Mandarin, Yen-Sun-Yat."

"Yen-Sun-Yat! My good sir! He warned you to abandon your visit? And you reject his advice? Listen to me." Smith was intensely excited now, his eyes bright, his lean figure curiously strung up, alert. "The Mandarin Yen-Sun-Yat is one of the seven!"

"I do not follow you, Mr. Smith."

"No, sir. China to-day is not the China of '98. It is a huge secret machine, and Ho-Nan one of its most important wheels! But if, as I understand, this official is a friend of yours, believe me, he has saved your life! You would be a dead man now if it were not for your friend in China! My dear sir, you must accept his counsel."

Then, for the first time since I had made his acquaintance, "Parson Dan" showed through the surface of the Rev. J. D. Eltham.

"No, sir!" replied the clergyman--and the change in his voice was startling. "I am called to Nan-Yang. Only One may deter my going."

The admixture of deep spiritual reverence with intense truculence in his voice was dissimilar from anything I ever had heard.

"Then only One can protect you," cried Smith, "for, by Heaven, no MAN will be able to do so! Your presence in Ho-Nan can do no possible good at present. It must do harm. Your experience in 1900 should be fresh in your memory."

"Hard words, Mr. Smith."

"The class of missionary work which you favor, sir, is injurious to international peace. At the present moment, Ho-Nan is a barrel of gunpowder; you would be the lighted match. I do not willingly stand between any man and what he chooses to consider his duty, but I insist that you abandon your visit to the interior of China!"

"You insist, Mr. Smith?"

"As your guest, I regret the necessity for reminding you that I hold authority to enforce it."

Denby fidgeted uneasily. The tone of the conversation was growing harsh and the atmosphere of the library portentous with brewing, storms.

There was a short, silent interval.

"This is what I had feared and expected," said the clergyman. "This was my reason for not seeking official protection."

"The phantom Yellow Peril," said Nayland Smith, "to-day materializes under the very eyes of the Western world."

"The 'Yellow Peril!'"

"You scoff, sir, and so do others. We take the proffered right hand of friendship nor inquire if the hidden left holds a knife! The peace of the world is at stake, Mr. Eltham. Unknowingly, you tamper with tremendous issues."

Mr. Eltham drew a deep breath, thrusting both hands in his pockets.

"You are painfully frank, Mr. Smith," he said; "but I like you for it. I will reconsider my position and talk this matter over again with you to-morrow."

Thus, then, the storm blew over. Yet I had never experienced such an overwhelming sense of imminent peril-- of a sinister presence--as oppressed me at that moment. The very atmosphere of Redmoat was impregnated with Eastern devilry; it loaded the air like some evil perfume. And then, through the silence, cut a throbbing scream-- the scream of a woman in direst fear.

"My God, it's Greba!" whispered Mr. Eltham.

CHAPTER 8

IN what order we dashed down to the drawing-room I cannot recall. But none was before me when I leaped over the threshold and saw Miss Eltham prone by the French windows.

These were closed and bolted, and she lay with hands outstretched in the alcove which they formed. I bent over her. Nayland Smith was at my elbow.

"Get my bag" I said. "She has swooned. It is nothing serious."

Her father, pale and wide-eyed, hovered about me, muttering incoherently; but I managed to reassure him; and his gratitude when, I having administered a simple restorative, the girl sighed shudderingly and opened her eyes, was quite pathetic.

I would permit no questioning at that time, and on her father's arm she retired to her own rooms.

It was some fifteen minutes later that her message was brought to me. I followed the maid to a quaint little octagonal apartment, and Greba Eltham stood before me, the candlelight caressing the soft curves of her face and gleaming in the meshes of her rich brown hair.

When she had answered my first question she hesitated in pretty confusion.

"We are anxious to know what alarmed you, Miss Eltham."

She bit her lip and glanced with apprehension towards the window.

"I am almost afraid to tell father," she began rapidly. "He will think me imaginative, but you have been so kind. It was two green eyes! Oh! Dr. Petrie, they looked up at me from the steps leading to the lawn. And they shone like the eyes of a cat."

The words thrilled me strangely.

"Are you sure it was not a cat, Miss Eltham?"

"The eyes were too large, Dr. Petrie. There was something dreadful, most dreadful, in their appearance. I feel foolish and silly for having fainted, twice in two days! But the suspense is telling upon me, I suppose. Father thinks"--she was becoming charmingly confidential, as a woman often will with a tactful physician--"that shut up here we are safe from--whatever threatens us." I noted, with concern, a repetition of the nervous shudder. "But since our return someone else has been in Redmoat!"

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Eltham?"

"Oh! I don't quite know what I do mean, Dr. Petrie. What does it ALL mean? Vernon has been explaining to me that some awful Chinaman is seeking the life of Mr. Nayland Smith. But if the same man wants to kill my father, why has he not done so?"

"I am afraid you puzzle me."

"Of course, I must do so. But--the man in the train. He could have killed us both quite easily! And--last night someone was in father's room."

"In his room!"

"I could not sleep, and I heard something moving. My room is the next one. I knocked on the wall and woke father. There was nothing; so I said it was the howling of the dog that had frightened me."

"How, could anyone get into his room?"

"I cannot imagine. But I am not sure it was a man."

"Miss Eltham, you alarm me. What do you suspect?"

"You must think me hysterical and silly, but whilst father and I have been away from Redmoat perhaps the usual precautions have been neglected. Is there any creature, any large creature, which could climb up the wall to the window? Do you know of anything with a long, thin body?"

For a moment I offered no reply, studying the girl's pretty face, her eager, blue-gray eyes widely opened and fixed upon mine. She was not of the neurotic type, with her clear complexion and sun-kissed neck; her arms, healthily toned by exposure to the country airs, were rounded and firm, and she had the agile shape of a young Diana with none of the anaemic languor which breeds morbid dreams. She was frightened; yes, who would not have been? But the mere idea of this thing which she believed to be in Redmoat, without the apparition of the green eyes, must have prostrated a victim of "nerves."

"Have you seen such a creature, Miss Eltham?"

She hesitated again, glancing down and pressing her finger-tips together.

"As father awoke and called out to know why I knocked, I glanced from my window. The moonlight threw half the lawn into shadow, and just disappearing in this shadow was something-- something of a brown color, marked with sections!"

"What size and shape?"

"It moved so quickly I could form no idea of its shape; but I saw quite six feet of it flash across the grass!"

"Did you hear anything?"

"A swishing sound in the shrubbery, then nothing more."

She met my eyes expectantly. Her confidence in my powers of understanding and sympathy was gratifying, though I knew that I but occupied the position of a father-confessor.

"Have you any idea," I said, "how it came about that you awoke in the train yesterday whilst your father did not?"

"We had coffee at a refreshment-room; it must have been drugged in some way. I scarcely tasted mine, the flavor was so awful; but father is an old traveler and drank the whole of his cupful!"

Mr. Eltham's voice called from below.

"Dr. Petrie," said the girl quickly, "what do you think they want to do to him?"

"Ah!" I replied, "I wish I knew that."

"Will you think over what I have told you? For I do assure you there is something here in Redmoat--something that comes and goes in spite of father's `fortifications'? Caesar knows there is. Listen to him. He drags at his chain so that I wonder he does not break it."

As we passed downstairs the howling of the mastiff sounded eerily through the house, as did the clank-clank of the tightening chain as he threw the weight of his big body upon it.

I sat in Smith's room that night for some time, he pacing the floor smoking and talking.

"Eltham has influential Chinese friends," he said; "but they dare not have him in Nan-Yang at present. He knows the country as he knows Norfolk; he would see things!"

"His precautions here have baffled the enemy, I think. The attempt in the train points to an anxiety to waste no opportunity. But whilst Eltham was absent (he was getting his outfit in London, by the way) they have been fixing some second string to their fiddle here. In case no opportunity offered before he returned, they provided for getting at him here!"

"But how, Smith?"

"That's the mystery. But the dead dog in the shrubbery is significant."

"Do you think some emissary of Fu-Manchu is actually inside the moat?"

"It's impossible, Petrie. You are thinking of secret passages, and so forth. There are none. Eltham has measured up every foot of the place. There isn't a rathole left unaccounted for; and as for a tunnel under the moat, the house stands on a solid mass of Roman masonry, a former camp of Hadrian's time. I have seen a very old plan of the Round Moat Priory as it was called. There is no entrance and no exit save by the steps. So how was the dog killed?"

I knocked out my pipe on a bar of the grate.

"We are in the thick of it here," I said.

"We are always in the thick of it," replied Smith. "Our danger is no greater in Norfolk than in London. But what do they want to do? That man in the train with the case of instruments--WHAT instruments? Then the apparition of the green eyes to-night. Can they have been the eyes of Fu-Manchu? Is some peculiarly unique outrage contemplated--something calling for the presence of the master?"

"He may have to prevent Eltham's leaving England without killing him."

"Quite so. He probably has instructions to be merciful. But God help the victim of Chinese mercy!"

I went to my own room then. But I did not even undress, refilling my pipe and seating myself at the open window. Having looked upon the awful Chinese doctor, the memory of his face, with its filmed green eyes, could never leave me. The idea that he might be near at that moment was a poor narcotic.

The howling and baying of the mastiff was almost continuous.

When all else in Redmoat was still the dog's mournful note yet rose on the night with something menacing in it. I sat looking out across the sloping turf to where the shrubbery showed as a black island in a green sea. The moon swam in a cloudless sky, and the air was warm and fragrant with country scents.

It was in the shrubbery that Denby's collie had met his mysterious death-- that the thing seen by Miss Eltham had disappeared. What uncanny secret did it hold?

Caesar became silent.

As the stopping of a clock will sometimes awaken a sleeper, the abrupt cessation of that distant howling, to which I had grown accustomed, now recalled me from a world of gloomy imaginings.

I glanced at my watch in the moonlight. It was twelve minutes past midnight.

As I replaced it the dog suddenly burst out afresh, but now in a tone of sheer anger. He was alternately howling and snarling in a way that sounded new to me. The crashes, as he leapt to the end of his chain, shook the building in which he was confined. It was as I stood up to lean from the window and commanded a view of the corner of the house that he broke loose.

With a hoarse bay he took that decisive leap, and I heard his heavy body fall against the wooden wall. There followed a strange, guttural cry...and the growling of the dog died away at the rear of the house. He was out! But that guttural note had not come from the throat of a dog. Of what was he in pursuit?

At which point his mysterious quarry entered the shrubbery I do not know. I only know that I saw absolutely nothing, until Caesar's lithe shape was streaked across the lawn, and the great creature went crashing into the undergrowth.

Then a faint sound above and to my right told me that I was not the only spectator of the scene. I leaned farther from the window.

"Is that you, Miss Eltham?" I asked.

"Oh, Dr. Petrie!" she said. "I am so glad you are awake. Can we do nothing to help? Caesar will be killed."

"Did you see what he went after?"

"No," she called back, and drew her breath sharply.

For a strange figure went racing across the grass. It was that of a man in a blue dressing-gown, who held a lantern high before him, and a revolver in his right hand. Coincident with my recognition of Mr. Eltham he leaped, plunging into the shrubbery in the wake of the dog.

But the night held yet another surprise; for Nayland Smith's voice came:

"Come back! Come back, Eltham!"

I ran out into the passage and downstairs. The front door was open. A terrible conflict waged in the shrubbery, between the mastiff and something else. Passing round to the lawn, I met Smith fully dressed. He just had dropped from a first-floor window.

"The man is mad!" he snapped. "Heaven knows what lurks there! He should not have gone alone!"

Together we ran towards the dancing light of Eltham's lantern. The sounds of conflict ceased suddenly. Stumbling over stumps and lashed by low-sweeping branches, we struggled forward to where the clergyman knelt amongst the bushes. He glanced up with tears in his eyes, as was revealed by the dim light.

"Look!" he cried.

The body of the dog lay at his feet.

It was pitiable to think that the fearless brute should have met his death in such a fashion, and when I bent and examined him I was glad to find traces of life.

"Drag him out. He is not dead," I said.

"And hurry," rapped Smith, peering about him right and left.

So we three hurried from that haunted place, dragging the dog with us. We were not molested. No sound disturbed the now perfect stillness.

By the lawn edge we came upon Denby, half dressed; and almost immediately Edwards the gardener also appeared. The white faces of the house servants showed at one window, and Miss Eltham called to me from her room:

"Is he dead?"

"No," I replied; "only stunned."

We carried the dog round to the yard, and I examined his head. It had been struck by some heavy blunt instrument, but the skull was not broken. It is hard to kill a mastiff.

"Will you attend to him, Doctor?" asked Eltham. "We must see that the villain does not escape."

His face was grim and set. This was a different man from the diffident clergyman we knew: this was "Parson Dan" again.

I accepted the care of the canine patient, and Eltham with the others went off for more lights to search the shrubbery. As I was washing a bad wound between the mastiff's ears, Miss Eltham joined me. It was the sound of her voice, I think, rather than my more scientific ministrations, which recalled Caesar to life. For, as she entered, his tail wagged feebly, and a moment later he struggled to his feet-- one of which was injured.

Having provided for his immediate needs, I left him in charge of his young mistress and joined the search party. They had entered the shrubbery from four points and drawn blank.

"There is absolutely nothing there, and no one can possibly have left the grounds," said Eltham amazedly.

We stood on the lawn looking at one another, Nayland Smith, angry but thoughtful, tugging at the lobe of his left ear, as was his habit in moments of perplexity.